

## Rhetorical Training in African American Churches: Doing Race Work from Church Spaces

Literary societies formed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in the US, were inexpensive sources of rhetorical education, alternative to school training, and social sites for adults in a community, which emerged in response to increasing democratic spaces, and whose lectures were given in public venues (Bode, 1956; Logan, 2008; Ray, 2005). Among these societies, lyceums were instances of evening entertainment, which served as sources of practical education (in the sciences), and of community information (Bode, 1956; Logan, 2005; Logan, 2008; McHenry, 2002; Powell, 1895; Ray, 2005). Research on these societies suggests that black lyceums, which belonged to black churches, and were extensions of former abolitionist societies (Logan 2008), were sites where African Americans obtained and displayed their rhetorical education as a by-product of their political activism. While most scholars agree these lyceums *declined* when their activities were taken over by the formal training and entertainment offered by public schools, universities, museums, libraries, and the radio (Powell, 1895; Bode, 1956; Logan, 2008), my research challenges this traditional approach for two reasons. First, in focusing on white lyceums only, the decline thesis fails to acknowledge that for African Americans, lyceums may not have been *alternative* sites, but their most relevant or only site of rhetorical education. Therefore, as a corollary, the decline thesis does not account for the permanence and or redistribution of activities that may have taken place in black lyceums or societies, and does not account for the conditions within which African Americans obtained their formal education (Anderson, 1988; Woodson, 1933/98). Second, the decline thesis assumes a linear redirection of lyceum-type of activities, where replacing them occurs as outside/community venues emerge, thus ignoring the

possibility of cross-cultural exchanges, and the creation of new, and sustained venues in the process.

My secondary source reading for this paper focuses on education (official and rhetorical) for African Americans prior to the late 1940s, in an attempt to understand what sites have been particularly significant for them. This scholarship provides a framework for my discussion on literary societies (the lyceum, in particular), on their sponsoring institutions (African American churches), and on the extent to which they served as alternative sites of rhetorical education for African American—complementary to official sites. Therefore, I intend to begin unpacking what the alternative thesis might mean, and to examine how it might apply to the African American experience; furthermore, I intend to explore how decline and redistribution of activities can be understood within that experience.

#### *Sites of Formal and Rhetorical Education for African Americans*

The scholarship on the education of African Americans and on their transition to official systems during the late 1800s and mid 1900s complicate, in my view, the decline thesis because this work suggests how complex educational insertion was for African Americans (Anderson, 1988; Brandt, 2001; Lerner, 1972/1992; Logan, 2004; Miller, 2003; Williams, 2005; Woodson, 1933/1998). This scholarship also identifies how relevant their church affiliations were, in affording literacy education and in providing spaces for community expression (Brandt, 2001; Logan, 2008). Moreover, this literature documents educational initiatives, where African Americans formed associations for self-help (reading clubs, Bible study groups, or literary societies) and civic engagement, and where they were auto-didactic, in both slavery and in freedom (Lerner, 1972/1992; Logan, 2008; Ray, 2005; Williams, 2005). These observations

further highlight how studying African American education is closely connected to their rhetorical training, which in turn connects to their possibility of becoming part of a new democracy. Therefore, while these initiatives, stemming from African American church spaces or from other local black venues, are certainly alternatives as they are conceived outside of the established systems of education, my research does not entirely see them as additional opportunities for rhetorical training.

Education for African Americans—both formal and rhetorical—has always been considered a vehicle for social uplift (Anderson, 1988; Lerner, 1972/1992; Logan, 2004; Logan, 2008; Miller, 2003; Woodson, 1933/1998). African American slaves were denied formal education; however, their furtive educational systems formed in bondage, their own abolitionist societies, and self-help associations of the 1800s assisted their abilities to effect ‘advancement of the race’ (Lerner, 1972/1992; Logan, 2004; Logan, 2008). While displaying self-determination and civic engagement, their educational initiatives were not always safely delivered, or even adequate, since their own black instructors might have had basic literacies themselves (Lerner, 1972/1992). Segregated schools of the late 1800s and those in the inner cities of the mid 1900s appeared not to have changed this landscape substantially, despite efforts of African Americans—most notably, from the South—to establish their own educational systems, most of them independent from other white educational institutions (Brandt, 2001; Logan, 2004; Williams, 2005). However, they did so in a climate that scholars and historians perceive as unwelcoming, segregated and one where accommodating them was deemed a charitable or even a problematic endeavor (Anderson, 1988; Williams, 2005; Woodson, 1933/1998).

Woodson (1933/1998), an African American historian and educator, in a disapproving gesture toward white American instruction in charge of black education (in the South and North),

questions the official system's approach to African American realities as highly ineffective, as a "mere imparting of information" (p. x), and as leaving blacks unprepared for labor markets. Moreover, his critique portrays a very dim educational climate, where increasing participation figures for blacks do not signal for him 'progress of the race' (p. xi). William's (2005) portrayal of southern blacks for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century aligns with this view, and she further contends they remained 'self-taught', underfunded, and disenfranchised (p. 201), where educational resources sent from the North—missionary teachers and funds—were scarce. Anderson (1988), in his discussion of southern education for blacks (1860-1935), identifies similar complexities, when liberal notions of education—typically from the North—are placed in opposition to more conservative traditions, supported by an economic system, which aimed to maintain blacks in the South as farmers. William's (2005) observations on the distinctions between manual and industrial training as opposed to reading, writing, and arithmetic reveals the conflicts of an educational system trying to determine whether to prepare African Americans for menial jobs or for 'more literate' ones.

This climate favored black migration to the North during in the interwar period, in search for more progressive curricula for their people; and it favored as well the development of more amicable institutions (Brandt, 2001). "The African-American church is a particularly important community institution in which to study literacy because of its central role in African-American communities as a site of cultural, religious, and educational activities." (Moss, 2003, p. 4). Therefore, within these concerns—spiritual and educational—moral training accompanied liberal education, and shaped it to conform to egalitarian Christian values, and egalitarian notions of knowledge and progress. This not only explains the emergence of black churches (early 1800s)—in response to the racism of its white counterparts—but it also explains their relevance

to black education, as these churches were the first to initiate efforts to educate former slaves (Logan, 2004; Miller, 2003; Moss, 2001; Moss, 2003). The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination is significant in this respect; and with the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (CME), and African Methodist Episcopal Zion, “organized and controlled nearly all the major colleges established by black organizations and shaped their educational policies.” (Logan, 2004). Brandt (2001) labels these black churches ‘sites of sponsorship’ of literacies (p. 107) and survival networks (p. 143). They were also the sites, which from church discussions, allowed the emergence of secular venues—literary societies, women’s clubs, or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People-NAACP (1910) for instance (Anderson, 1988; Logan, 2008).

These discussions suggest that the educational concerns for African Americans have always translated into access issues, where their ability to attend formal educational systems secured their ability to be included in civil society. These discussions further direct attention to how effective the official system may have been in conveying such instruction. They also highlight how relevant it is to examine black churches as learning spaces for African Americans. Not only is it highly likely that African American churches, and their literary societies, have completed the work of the official system, but these may have been the only safe sites where African Americans were capable of articulating their humanity, value, and eloquence (Logan, 2008). They may also have been the places where they began their insertion into community venues, thus enacting their notions of social change.

When outside options may not be readily available or even accommodating to African Americans, maintaining these local educational initiatives in church venues—by redistributing their formats, or maintaining their protocols—seems a sensible response. Therefore, the decline

thesis might dismiss too easily, what black churches have already demonstrated, which is their ability to distance themselves from white denominations, organize their own religious and secular venues, and sustain and foster education for their people. Specific inquiries emerging from this scholarship, and which could be applied to primary findings include exploring black participation in the official systems of education, what these systems were producing for them, and whether they were safe, or accommodating.

*Exploring Rhetorical Practices in an African American Church in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century*

This case study focuses on a local instance of the lyceum movement—the Baraca-Philathea Lyceum (ca 1910-1940s)—a literary society sponsored by the Baraca Men’s Bible Study (or Baraca Class) of Bethel AME Church, an African American congregation in Champaign, IL (Bethel, 1938; Gray & Thornhill, 1920; Lee, 1912-28). My work with Bethel began as a historical project, as an attempt to recover the history of the Baraca-Philathea Lyceum—its origins, the moments when it ‘declined’, and its lost programs and journal—by means of archival research, interviews with members, and participant observations (February-August 2009).

As my ethnographic observations of Bethel’s current programs—historical, religious, and musical—began suggesting multiple networks of social and civic engagements, some of them displaying lyceum-type of formats, Bethel’s past rhetorical practices, its sources of rhetorical education, and their church applications emerged as my next inquiries (August-December 2009). Moreover, in considering the networks that Bethel has created when its church work connects to other communities—African American neighborhoods, Champaign and Urbana City Councils, Schools Boards, local libraries, and the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign)—my interests extended to how these other communities may have shaped Bethel’s rhetorical spaces. I have

also initially framed these interests up to the late 1940s to align my work with the Baraca-Philathea Lyceum lifetime. My research intends to explore as well what Bethel did in those moments of crossing back and forth, to understand cross-cultural influences, as well as Bethel's sources of rhetorical and formal education.

According to Logan (2004), "social change has always been partially the result of rhetorical action, oral or written arguments crafted to elicit specific responses. Given that rhetorical action is initiated in response to mediated exigencies, few Americans have had a greater need to respond than have African Americans nor a greater desire to *learn* [my emphasis] how to respond effectively." (p. 37). Therefore, Bethel's work aligns with the scholarship on local politics, neighborhood- and community-based activism, and on social change (Dodson, 2002). Tracing its work conforms to larger issues involving African American rhetorical, formal and religious education—their grassroots work and agencies, and their location and access to local resources (Brandt, 2001; Miller, 2003; Williams, 2005). Furthermore, Bethel, and its lyceum, were instances of educational venues—outside of the official system—which engaged in civic and political/civic affairs, and for which rhetorical education—composing speeches, sustaining debates, and delivering them in public assemblies and in their own church spaces—served racial advocacy (Logan, 2005; Logan, 2008; Royster, 2000).

Within this framework, my research pays close attention to the rhetorical and civic practices of this particular structure—the lyceum—to understand how it may have declined, if it has done so, and to understand how it may have remained within the institutions sponsoring it (Brandt, 2001). The oral histories that I collected (August-November 2009) go beyond the late 1940s, as does my archival work. However, in this paper, I am reporting what my primary

sources suggest for Bethel, its lyceum, and its rhetorical training for the interwar period (early 1920s to late 1940s)—during the Baraca-Philathea Lyceum lifetime.

*Oral Histories Project: Methodology, Description, and Preliminary Observations*

Based on secondary source reading and archival research (both at the University Archives and in Bethel), and given the absence of complete textual records documenting the Baraca-Philathea Lyceum, I considered new forms of data collection—oral histories from senior members in the congregation. By collecting these oral histories as the only means available to reconstruct and interpret incomplete archival material, my research (August-December 2009) began exploring both the decline thesis and the internal redistribution one. My preliminary observations of current Bethel practices suggested that this church served an educational and social function for its congregation; moreover, several of Bethel's current activities appeared to be embodiments of old lyceum-type of functions. My purpose was to begin to unpack the rhetorical practices performed in Bethel, and to attempt to map the Lyceum's influence for its congregation.

Methodology. My research in Bethel during February-May 2009 concluded with a *Proposal for the Study of African American Literacies (Oral Histories)*, which was both submitted for IRB consideration, and approved in August 2009. My continuous participation in some of Bethel's programs during May-August 2009 maintained this project in the congregation's memory, thus allowing me to revisit the research with Bethel's Pastor (July 2009), and to address the whole community, both during a Sunday service, and in a letter included in a Sunday Bulletin (September 2009).

Taking the Baraca-Philathea Lyceum as a point of departure, I composed a questionnaire as part of the Proposal (May 2009), which covered three time frames—1910 until the late 1940s;

during the 1960s; and from the 1980s up to the present time. My interests focused on Bethel's practices—understood as socio-cultural, political, and religious activities—and on their rhetorical training. I asked members for their recollections of Bethel's lyceum and its programs—their own recollections and those of relatives. I also asked them for their recollections of their rhetorical education and advocacy, and their impressions on where they locate lyceum-type of venues in their past and in current practices. The questionnaire was accompanied by sample archival material—letters, old programs, and Bethel histories—and photographs and newspaper clippings involving Bethel, gathered since February 2009, and which I have compiled in an Interview Protocol binder. These materials—photocopies, scanned photographs, and newspaper articles—come from the University Archives, the Urbana Free Library (UFL), Bethel's institutional documents, and from members' contributions to my research. Allowing interviewees to review elements of their own history to which they could refer when responding to my questions, has an instrumental value, since these materials work as visual representations of their own collective memories, thus securing these memories, and fostering new ones.

The protocol was continuously revised as I talked to my interviewees, to incorporate new ideas, venues, or practices that members remembered and brought to our conversations. The most recent version of the Interview Protocol (November 2009), which includes a list of Bethel's organizations throughout the years, is shown in Appendix 1. All interviewees signed consent forms, and allowed me to audio, and video tape them. Some of them shared materials from their private archives, whose copies I added to the protocol binder; some have offered to share their documents at a later opportunity. Interviewees were selected according to age, and involvement in Bethel (positions and knowledge their church history), and at the recommendation of Bethel's Pastor.

Description. From September to November 2009, I conducted five interview sessions with eight Bethel members, whose ages ranged from approximately 50 to 97 years old. I interviewed seven women and one man. Two of those sessions accommodated more than one interviewee at a time—two siblings (brother and sister), whose parents, now deceased, were very influential members; and three sisters, who come from a family of WWI heroes, and who have privately maintained Bethel's and family archives. In both cases, I thought their combined participations would make the interviewees more productive in their recollections, as was the case. Individually, I interviewed three women; two of them are the oldest members in the congregation (96 and 97 years old); and a third woman, who came to Bethel in the 1970s, but had belonged to an AME congregation, and who was interested in sharing Bethel's records she had recently received. These members are (or had been) University of Illinois graduates and officials, school directors, School Board members, and Bethel's officials.

Interviews were transcribed in full, with minimal omissions taking place when the conversations digressed, or when the interviewees were inspecting the Protocol binder. Transcriptions were organized according to the themes that emerged during our conversations—the Lyceum, Albert Lee (Bethel's most widely known member, former President of the Lyceum, and Chief Clerk of the President's Office from 1920 to 1942 at the University), rhetorical training, political activism, and the AME denomination. In this paper, I am discussing these themes (up to the late 1940s), as they begin to reflect Bethel's work for this community as essential, rhetorical, cross-cultural, and racial.

Preliminary Observations. My interviewees' recollections strongly suggest that Bethel was their most relevant social site for members and for university students who attended services—a site that they remember as highly active. According to Mrs. E. Merrifield, a retired

historian and nurse, “[the church] was the center of [their] ... universe ... social lives came from the church ...” (interview, November 12, 2009). My other interviewees shared this view, and for the early 1900s and well into the 1970s, they see the church as supportive of black university students’ needs. “[T]hey ... felt left out, that there wasn’t anything for African Americans there [University], and so they would come to the community [Bethel] ...” (Mrs. M. Benson, interview, September 10, 2009). The University of Illinois (1940), in a report documenting the situation of black students in campus, acknowledges the role of Bethel in supplying social spaces for students. Within these members’ sustained memories of activism, the multiplicity of Bethel’s initiatives, clubs, societies, and associations is noteworthy for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This activism is inward-oriented, when it supplies meals and lodging for university students, and when it serves social, entertainment, spiritual, and educational services for its members. Moreover, Bethel’s initiatives seem to respond to immediate needs, and members fashion them from the church’s resources, and from their own expertise—ad hoc initiatives. “[B]lack people have always organized themselves around projects, and people in Bethel were no different.” (Mr. N. Banks, interview, September 12, 2009).

Within this activism, Bethel emerges as an educational site as well (for young and adult members), with both rhetorical and non-rhetorical practices as part of their teachings. At various times, young members attended an after-school program; they were expected to perform readings, announcements, or rituals for the congregation during services, were trained in arts and crafts, and were taught music. In Mrs. E. Merrifield’s recollections, “we learned how to read at school, but we learned just as much at church.” (interview, November 12, 2009). Furthermore, when fulfilling social services for their members, there was always an educational element to them. Interviewees remember how when Bethel cared for the children of working parents after

school, those in charge had teaching experience and spent time with these children in Bethel's library, where they had a pipe organ as well, and promoted reading habits, and fostered music literacies.

Bethel's initiatives reached the extended community as well—it reached those who may not have been members initially. This is the case with the Baraca-Philathea Lyceum, a literacy marker for this community, since this venue allowed and even fostered multiple actors, who were Bethel members and university students, to move across contexts and to engage in rhetorical training, race discussions, and in higher education (Bethel, 1938; Gray & Thornhill, 1920; Lee, 1912-28; Lee, 1938; University of Illinois, 1940). Moreover, this particular venue—the Baraca-Philathea Lyceum—exemplifies Bethel's strong collective awareness, from the 1920s to the late 1940s, on how rhetorical work is useful for race work (advancement of the race), as it is cogently articulated in the lyceum's organizational letters (Lee, 1912-1928). “Everything that is good for the Race and the community, we should try and help better it [the lyceum] by boosting and encouraging it [the lyceum]” (Gray & Thornhill, 1920).

An enactment of this awareness is Bethel's oratorical practices and the importance placed on public articulations, documented during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Lee, 1912-28; Lee, 1928). According to my interviewees, Bethel members were drilled in elocution and parliamentary work, were trained in debates, and were expected to do recitations during functions. Mrs. H. Suggs remembers how elocution lessons were paired with teachings on proper expressions and intonation. “[S]o you not only were taught to uh ... perform to uh an audience, but you were taught to get your point across ...” (interview, November 12, 2009). These memories align with characterizations of the late 1800s, and early 1900s as oratorical and civic-oriented (Logan, 2004; Logan, 2008; Ray, 2005). In Bethel's case, the oratorical is also deeply

rooted in the history and speeches of known rhetors (Truth, Douglass, and Bethune), which Bethel has recreated in functions (archival material and ethnographic observations, August-December, 2009). That is, these unofficial, church sponsored pedagogies aimed to equip members in their advocacy, both in Bethel, and out of it. How much of this was also done in university venues? How many lectures could have been offered in university spaces that served as forums similar to those of Bethel's lyceum?

### *Revisiting the Baraca-Philathea Lyceum*

Information on the Baraca-Philathea Lyceum is very limited, and can be partially inferred from archival records found at the University of Illinois. The Albert Lee Papers (Record Series 2/6/21, Box 3, Baraca-Philathea Lyceum folder), in a series of institutional letters, illustrate the lyceum's concerns ('what is good for the race'); its organization based on literary programs (readings, declamations, papers, orations, talks, extempores, and debates), music numbers (vocal and instrumental), and social hours; and its purpose ('civic betterment'). Examples of racial concerns, listed in the programs and extempores include, economic benefits from migrating to the North; anti lynching legislation; potential professional careers for blacks; situation and records of 'colored' students in Champaign and Urbana High schools, and at the University; 'Negro' businesses in both cities; KKK awareness; and the work of the NAACP in Champaign. No records exist documenting its journal—BarPhilathea Journal—which is listed in the programs, and which may have been a paper, or simply an institutional log.

According to University Archival material, the Baraca-Philathea Lyceum was created in ca 1910; it interrupted its programs during WWI, and became a dynamic forum during the interwar period. It was expected to produce five numbers each time, and met the second Friday

of each month (Lee, 1912-28). As a non-denominational venue open to the community, it served as a site of both rhetorical education and display for African American students at the University and for Bethel members (Gray & Thornhill, 1920; Lee, 1912-28). In its 1940 report (welfare/religion section), the University of Illinois acknowledges the work of ‘Bethel AME Lyceum’ and portrays it as a “laboratory”, as a venue for the expression of repressed ideas (p. 6). My interviewees do remember their lyceum, from parents and older relatives; one of the oldest members of the congregation once performed a solo number in a program, but she was too young to be a participant in it. “I knew they had debates [possibly deliberative ones], and discussions. But I was not- wasn’t a part of it ...” (Mrs. E. Bridgewater, interview, September 17, 2009).

Albert Lee, President of the Lyceum (1922-24), was its most forceful organizer—“a stickler for rules and regulations” according to a senior member (Mrs. E. Bridgewater, interview, September 17, 2009)—whose strong leadership was also demonstrated in other areas in Bethel—church choir, for instance. Lee’s letters prompted the lyceum’s officers to excel in their work finding material, guest speakers, and performers, and pressed repeatedly for punctuality in both their business and the lyceum’s meetings. His letters were not shy in signaling disappointment as well—“[the lyceum] has not measured up to our ideas, but ... has done some good.” (Albert Lee, 1912-28). Most notably, Lee exemplifies the sorts of associations that Bethel members create, when they move across institutional boundaries. He also exemplifies an understanding of how race work can be performed through rhetorical training—‘literacy as sociopolitical action’ in Royster’s (2000) terms. Moreover, Lee’s position as Chief Clerk in the President’s Office at the University (1920-1942), and his willingness to represent their needs in university venues, when they felt mistreated, made him the “de facto dean of African-American students” (Guide, 1994, Introduction section, para. 2).

This lyceum's only documented period in existence—when Lee was its President—coincides with Lee's active work for the University, his advocacy for African American students, and his vision of the lyceum, as the space where these students would be in charge of its programs—content and organization (Lee, 1912-28). The University report on the situation of black students in campus (1940) is also the last archival record documenting the existence of the Baraca-Philathea Lyceum. "Bethel AME Lyceum which has functioned for about thirty years, is now managed and attended almost entirely by Negro students." (University of Illinois, 1940, p. 6). No archival evidence—in Bethel or at the University—documents this lyceum's existence after 1948, when Lee died.

While the archives and these members memories suggest that the Baraca-Philathea Lyceum's shape and rhetorical force during the 1920s and possibly up to late 1940s may be attributed to Lee's personality, work ethics, and collegiate exposure, all my interviewees seem to resist a leadership and rhetorical training situated on one individual and one venue only. His lasting impression is explained by his records and his writings (Mr. N. Banks, interview, September 12, 2009), which have survived, in my view, because they were sent to the University Archives, and were saved from a fire that destroyed part of Bethel's library material in the early 1950s. Some also recall other members conducting rhetorical practices after Lee (interview, November 12, 2009). In terms of venues, such practices are also seen in their Sunday schools and after-school programs, in addition to the lyceum work. That is, they continue to locate Lee's protocol in church venues; although some see it as more dispersed (Mr. N. Banks, interview, September 12, 2009).

According to my interviewees' perceptions, students' attachments to Bethel declined in time, as they increasingly found spaces elsewhere; Bethel's programs also became more youth-

oriented (school-aged members) after Lee's passing. "[D]uring the 50s and 60s, there were lots of different opportunities that people in the community had, so the church became less of the place where everything was developed, and some of these other organizations start becoming prominent, ..." (Mr. N. Banks, interview, September 12, 2009). Although perceptions like these might seem to elude my argument concerning the decline of literary societies, my original questions still stand—what were these seemingly more open spaces accomplishing for African American students, and for the black community in Bethel?

In spite of their sense that students migrated to university spaces, these members also remember supporting these students—board and food—certainly during the 1940s, but even up to the 1970s (Mrs. M. Benson, interview, September 10, 2009). The University of Illinois' report (1940), in its living conditions section, does not seem reassuring, when it acknowledges overcrowding in some the black organized houses. The University also reports how some of these houses were at "some distance" from campus, and indicates how "theoretically" the women's residence halls were open to African Americans (p. 5). Therefore, while these observations concern non-rhetorical contributions, these transition times (1940s), when support was shared by university and Bethel venues, complicate my argument in new ways. I return once more to my original concerns. Was these students' (and Bethel members') rhetorical training progressively supplied elsewhere (e.g. at the University) as well?

My interviewees tend to mistake the Baraca-Philathea Lyceum for the Baraca Class, since its organizational meetings and Bethel's Bible studies were held in the same room—their library—up to the late 1940s. This conflation points to the several learning endeavors that Bethel hosted in one single space—its library—and it also highlights how their members (young and adult) were participants in multiple ones—their lyceum, Bible studies, reading groups, and after-

school programs. In looking for evidence of lyceum-type of practices, this conflation becomes salient, when my interviewees consistently see in the Baraca Class (up to the late 1940s), currently the Men's Bible Study organization modes similar to those of the lyceum. They do so, in my view, because of the discussions on racial issues that typically accompanied their scriptural training in the men's Bible studies (Mrs. E. Bridgewater, interview, September 17, 2009). The Baraca Manual, a procedural document written by Lee, designed to direct the men's Bible sessions and the closest piece that I have found to the Baraca-Philathea Lyceum's programs, supports these memories in its discussion component, and in its rhetorical training—debate drills for discussion of civic concerns (Lee, 1928). This suggests a practice that may have continued to exist, at least for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### *Articulating Race Work in Church Spaces*

Examining Bethel's work for the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, through archives and oral histories, reveals a strong social component, which is also highly educational and rhetorical. Bethel, with the Baraca-Philathea Lyceum, emerges as a site of religious, practical, and rhetorical education, for its members, and for the university students, who attended its services. “[A]t that time [during the lyceum] the students who were here, mostly came to Bethel Church, and it [the lyceum] was an outreach to those students.” (Mr. N. Banks, interview, September 12, 2009). My interviewees do not see Bethel as an alternative place for them during the lyceum period; nor do they think black university students had very many options elsewhere. Therefore, in their collective memory, not only was Bethel (and their members) ‘being good to its race’ (Mrs. L. Gray, interview, September 18, 2009) by supplying board and food, but it was also training students (and their own members) for racial advocacy.

My oral histories and archival work suggest that race work is integral to their educational concerns (and rhetorical training), and is articulated as religious work as well. According to Mrs. H. Suggs, “[race work is] a Christian duty that you do ... you’re taught the concepts [sense of civic duty] at church ...” (interview, November 12, 2009). With their religious beliefs shaping their understanding of race work, several denotations were brought to my interviews. Race work was understood as ‘being political’, as civic engagement, community work, and as being rhetorically apt. Regardless of the term used, when elaborating on their race work, these members separate church spaces and church times for either devotion or for civic engagement, thus distinguishing what is religious from what is secular, even when these share the same physical space. This might explain why some members consider they have never been political; while others indicate that race work, even when they see it as a religious duty, is never done from the pulpit.

This duality in their perception of their church spaces is a noteworthy area to explore, when my preliminary observations suggest a gendered division in their race work. Women in Bethel seemed to have performed both a domestic (doing work from church spaces) and a missionary role (connecting their church to other Christian denominations), while men have traditionally been known for their consistency in their Bible studies, race discussions, and pulpit leadership. I do not intend to establish any binaries; however, my interviewees brought these divisions to my attention, while they noticed at the same time, that they have now women in directive positions (interviews, September 12 & November 12, 2009). Mountford (2003) and her ‘sacred rhetorical spaces’ and Royster’s (2000) analysis of “the manner and means of African American women’s participation within worlds of discourse” (pp. 61-62), should provide a framework for my understanding of the tropes of men’s/women’s place in the black church.

My research suggests that up to the 1940s (and possibly still today), the most relevant moments, when Bethel's rhetorical education and political activism are seen interacting, are when members have acted across contexts. Understanding permanence and redistribution entails, in my view, understanding what members do in those moments of 'crossing' back and forth. The Baraca-Philathea Lyceum, and its ties to Bethel and to the University, exemplify such moments. Adult literacies were molded in the lyceum through parliamentarian drills, of which Lee was an instructor (Lee, 1912-1928; Lee, 1928). Members remember as well how adults (not necessarily university students) read and memorized the Robert's Rules of Order for deliberative meetings—for their discussions and debates. Mrs. E. Rivers remembers how her father was a good parliamentarian, how adults in the 1940s learned the history of Illinois, and how that knowledge helped them in their civic work (interview, November 12, 2009).

When Bethel's race work is positioned alongside official university discourses about black students in campus (University of Illinois, 1940), interrogating how effective university spaces may have been for African American students seems pertinent. In its *Negro Students, 1939-1940* report, the University of Illinois (1940) argues for the visibility of African American students based on their increasing numbers, and their participation in university events (Commencement, for instance) 'without discrimination.' For instance, the report states, "[a]ll curricula are open to Negro students in all Colleges and Schools without discrimination, both at Urbana and Chicago." (University of Illinois, 1940, p. 2), while conceding that there are few employment opportunities at the University (p. 3). Moreover, in documenting the extra curricular activities in which black students engage, the report lists, among others, the rhetorical work of the ILLINI (a student paper), the Philomathean Literary Society, the Illinois Inter-collegiate Debating Team, and the Honorary Debating Fraternity, all of which were active from ca 1900 to

1920. However, in these organizations, only two African American students are known to have been part of them, according to this report (University of Illinois, p. 4). A visual exercise articulating my preliminary observations on Bethel's sources/notions of education is included in Appendix 2.

### *Concluding Remarks*

My work in Bethel AME Church—archival research and oral histories—focused on its sources of rhetorical education and its race work, aimed at social change. The Baraca-Philathea Lyceum, which belonged to Bethel, was an instance of both rhetorical education and race work performed in Bethel, up to the late 1940s. Most senior members remember the lyceum; few remember when this venue ‘disappeared’; yet most believe its protocol is still present in other church venues—mostly in Bethel's Men Bible Study. In considering where the Baraca-Philathea Lyceum went, I became interested examining the place of this church-sponsored society in the rhetorical training of those who were part of it—Bethel members, and black university students. Furthermore, its decline, although it aligns with the scholarship on the lyceum movement, does not capture its afterlife, and its apparent continuation in Bethel. “[T]he culture of the black community started in the black church but it's no longer confined to the black church, so ... almost the lyceum is still in existence in a different form ...” (Mr. N. Banks, interview, September 12, 2009). Senior members share these perceptions. Therefore, a historical project, one that aimed to reconstruct the history of this lyceum, is now an exploratory one—was this lyceum an alternative site, how relevant was it for Bethel, and for the university students in charge of it, and how much of its protocol has remained in Bethel and has impacted its community?

My research suggests that Bethel's lyceum was indeed a site of rhetorical training and display in service of race work; and while it was a site alternative to formal schooling, it may have been these members' main site of rhetorical training. While my interviews suggest how Bethel members actively brought their rhetorical education to the University, to their African American communities, and to Champaign/Urbana, the AME denomination and even the black Masons, need to be explored, in terms of the rhetorical practices that these two organizations might have brought to Bethel and its lyceum. Archival work and my oral histories call attention to these two venues. Furthermore, the Baraca-Philathea Lyceum was not Bethel's first literary society. "[M]any Literary Societies flourished featuring debates and programs, existed in different periods." (Bethel, 1938, p. 6). In addition, understanding Bethel's gendered work as they connect to their religious and rhetorical spaces, should illustrate as well how this community has sustained certain practices, has extended them out of their boundaries, and has transformed them for racial purposes. Therefore, within a framework understanding literacy as highly social and purposeful, this paper argues for the cross-cultural, inter-textual, and interpersonal links that Bethel has created, in time and space, between its programs and activities and the individual initiatives of its members, and its extended community.

Finally, when a university report (1939-1940), the one that has been cited a number of times in this paper, has as its first comment on the achievements of its African American alumni, the following observation: "[n]one have been confined to prison or convicted of crime." (University of Illinois, 1940, p. 7), official notions/narratives of the University as a primary space for African American students needs to be further examined. Furthermore, when such disclaimers are accompanied by assurances that the university's reputation has not been damaged by its black students, and when these assurances are placed prior to discussions of these students'

accomplishments, I find it relevant to interrogate the university educational climate during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (for the purposes of this paper). What were these students' sources of rhetorical training? Was race work performed from school venues? What was the nature of their composition classes and what civic applications did these classes have? These concerns should help my research advance, and complicate discussions on alternative venues, and rhetorical practices of permanence and distribution for African Americans.

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